

# The Christian News-Letter

Edited by  
KATHLEEN BLISS

23rd January, 1946

DEAR MEMBER,

On Christmas Eve Pope Pius XII broadcast to the world an important Allocution in which he announced the creation of thirty-two new cardinals.

The Sacred College is now brought up to its full strength of seventy members. Only four of the new cardinals are Italians. The remaining twenty-eight include an important contingent from the Americas and the first Chinese cardinal. Among the European cardinals are three whose names are associated with the most outspoken opposition to Nazism—the Bishops of Berlin and Munster and the Archbishop of Toulouse. There is now a non-Italian majority in the Sacred College, and since its most important function is the election of a new pope, the next election may conceivably bring a break in the long line of Italian popes.

## ROME AND EUROPE

The Pope gave two reasons for this large creation of cardinals. In the first place, it is a recognition of one of the main changes in the life of the Church in the last few hundred years. Whereas for centuries Europe was the home of Christendom from which the faith flowed outwards to the ends of the earth, now in many countries the Church is strongly established. The restored Sacred College reflects more closely the new pattern of the Church's life which is, in the Pope's words, "a sharing of life and energy between all members of the Mystical Body of Christ on Earth."

Secondly, the Pope drew a parallel between the times of St. Augustine and our own. Just as St. Augustine saw the Church as the City of God unshakeable amid the ruins of a disintegrating world, so in these days the Church must assert her supra-national character and be to all "that great universal home which, according to God's promise, will last to the end of time. For our part we want to make that home ever more solid, ever more attractive to all, without exception."

The Roman Church is strongly established throughout the American continent. The United States alone contribute as much to its coffers in Peter's Pence as all the rest of the world put together. Some who look for a purely political interpretation of the Papal Allocution have, therefore, found in it a seeming despair of

Europe and a foreshadowing of a shift of the balance of power in the Church from Europe to the New World.

But there are also indications that Europe and its needs occupy the main place in the Pope's thinking. If the object of Papal policy is to bring the forces of the Roman Church everywhere to rescue from disintegration the European Christian tradition which it did so much to create, and to save the people to whom it has for so long ministered, it will find itself supported at many points by the forces of Christendom which lie outside that communion.

There is no real justification for thinking that Europe is lost to Christendom. The Churches on the continent have emerged from the war and the still longer struggle with Nazism, materially impoverished and with their ministries depleted ; but their inner strength, their standing with the people have been enormously increased and not since the Reformation has there been such willingness and ability to work with each other as has been shown first against Nazism and now in tasks of relief.

A new Christendom in Europe is not a wild dream, but something worth praying and working for with all our powers. To have such a hope does not mean shutting our eyes to large unsolved questions of which the attitude of the Papacy to communism as a political creed and Russia as a power is one of the chief.

The prayers of Christians everywhere are with the United Nations during the present Assembly meetings in London ; we know what the failure to achieve unity may mean to the world. How can a divided Church preach with a clear conscience the necessity of unity among the nations ? How can we repent of the sins which divide the human family without an even deeper penitence for those which divide the family of Christ ? We are now in the middle of the Octave of Prayer for Christian Unity (January 18-25) when Christians in all Churches, Roman Catholics and Orthodox, Anglicans and Protestants, pray for God's gift of unity.

## THE CINEMA

It is quite unnecessary for us to remind our readers of the immense influence of the cinema on the lives of ordinary people, and particularly young people. The figure of 1,560 million cinema attendances a year indicates that it is the most popular form of public entertainment.

Because of the enormous importance of the cinema, we have asked a competent authority to provide us with a Supplement which describes the main structure of the film industry and points to some of the results of the existing set-up.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps our readers will turn to this and read it before they read our comments.

<sup>1</sup> *Tendencies to Monopoly in the Cinematograph Film Industry* (H.M. Stationery Office, 1d.), is a valuable and readable document.

Much has been said and written about the effect of the cinema on young people. Some strongly deplore its moral influence and are inclined to attribute the rise in juvenile crime, the decline in sexual morality, and many other evils, to the influence of films. Others say that while the influence of the film on superficial things is considerable, young people are shrewd enough to know that films are make-believe and are far from accepting the film world as a reliable pattern for living. A more serious criticism of the films is not that they are morally perverting, but that they use up a disproportionate amount of leisure time to the detriment of other activities, and a great deal of money.

It is probably true that many of us who have deplored the influence of films have been so anxious to stress what is vicious that we have entirely overlooked the influence of what is fatuous. Films do not usually extol adultery, violence, graft, cruelty, or any of the known vices, except perhaps pride. As a rule the wife regains her erring husband, true lovers meet, criminals are jailed, and virtue triumphs. If films have a corrupting influence, probably the childishness and immaturity of many story films is the most insidious.

The cinema does little or nothing to reflect and interpret the life that the audience knows, or to encourage self-criticism. People went to the music hall to enjoy laughing at themselves and their friends, cunningly displayed to them by an artist who was an interpreter of the community to itself. When they go to the films they usually see people acting as they would never act, in situations in which they are never likely to find themselves. As our Supplement explains, this is very largely due to the stranglehold monopoly of American films and to the fact that the expenditure in making films is so great, and the organization so elaborate that the cultural element, the interpretation of the community to itself, is submerged. The war has made a difference to this. It created in the nation a sense of community wide enough to match the grand scale of the film, and documentary films, which were made for the Government with the expectation of loss, for the first time invaded the commercial cinema as box office successes and as powerful rivals of the feature film.

We need to distinguish carefully between *films* and *the cinema*. This is not always done and causes confusion. Films can be made about very nearly anything and shown nearly anywhere. We can have educational films in schools, instructional films at military courses, religious films in churches, and the possibilities of development are almost endless. But the cinema is something quite different. Vast numbers of people go every week for what is really a mixture of a big feature film, warmth and comfort and "a bob's worth of dark," the cinema organ and some community singing, the

news in pictures, a cartoon and perhaps a stage turn. The cinema is a mixed bag of entertainment to suit many tastes, from hurdy-gurdy to symphony concert, and in appraising it we have to ask whether the acting, the photography, the music are good *of their kind*.

The most important thing we have to do is to bring not negative but positive standards of judgment to the cinema and to encourage other people to do the same. To get a group of young people to give up just going to the cinema once, twice or thrice a week with clockwork regularity and complete lack of choice, and to begin choosing to go to certain films and choosing to stay away from certain others, is a distinct advance. In the long (it may be very long) run the consumer gets what he wants, for as Sir Alexander Korda remarked about his film "Rembrandt," which was a grand failure, "millions of people stayed away from it." The cinema is not an art, but an industry employing artists. It decides what to give people, and by making it cheap, by high pressure advertising and a dozen other expedients, it makes them think they like what they are given. One thing to be done is to help cinema-goers to discover what they themselves really want and to encourage them to stay away if they don't get it. Local managers are paid to report local reactions, and even requests from the public for certain films to be shown do not always meet with a negative reply.

One of the difficulties is that there are no successful rivals to the commercial cinema. In the last twenty-five years, some exceedingly good films have been made, films which could be seen over and over again. They are on show for a few months and they disappear, except for rare showing at a "Classic" cinema. Why cannot they be seen outside the commercial cinema? One reason is that the renters and cinema circuit owners do not want any rivals. The other is a purely technical reason. All big feature films shown in the cinema are on 35 mm. films, which are pure celluloid, explosively inflammable, and therefore by regulation only shown in licensed buildings with the requisite protection. This means that although hundreds of 16 mm. films can be obtained from the Central Film Library or from the British Film Institute and shown anywhere by anyone who has a projector, none of these 16 mm. films are feature films, the big films which are the mainstay of the film industry. A small step in the right direction has recently been taken by the British Film Institute, which has obtained permission to make reprints of about a dozen outstanding feature films in a form which can be used by the ordinary projector. This will help to overcome the present difficulty, which is that many people are giving in youth clubs and elsewhere talks on films and the cinema, but they can never illustrate them by the kind of films which people go to the cinema to see.

The other and perhaps better method of creating among young cinema-goers standards of criticism is to use the cinema itself. To create such standards ought not to be as fantastically difficult as some people believe. We have in sport in this country an astonishingly highly developed criticism of "form." Thousands of people who go to football matches every week have a standard of form by which they judge players and referees. What we have to do is to develop the same criticism of form among cinema goers, and to include in form both technical and cultural standards of excellence. Here is a description from the general secretary of the Nottingham Y.M.C.A. of what has been done in a youth club with a boy membership of over 200 to create critical standards :—

" For nearly three years we have run a ' Film Review Circle.' Weekly meetings have been held, a small committee of members has been appointed to arrange the programme and the average attendance has been approximately thirty. Apart from special talks on some aspect of film industry, the showing of special films in the club premises, etc., the normal procedure has been for the group to select a film showing at a local cinema to attend as a group. The local Odeon has been extremely helpful in this connection and has placed at our disposal a block of seats at a reduced price at a convenient time. Members of the group have been selected to study the film from various points of view, i.e., plot or story, ability of actors in large or small parts, production, etc. The next meeting of the ' Film Review Circle ' has then taken place and short papers have been given and a general discussion has taken place on the film last seen by the group. A genuine effort has been made to study every type of film. Nevertheless, although Hollywood musicals, ' Whodunits ' and so-called comedy films have been reviewed, they have rarely proved a satisfactory subject for criticism and discussion by the group as have the more reputable films which have some intellectual content and give some intellectual satisfaction. The popular film seems to split the group into two ; those who like it because they go for honest amusement and those who hate it because they want something more than amusement.

" We have now reached the point with the group where we feel that it wants more specialized and knowledgeable leadership than can be given by the ordinary member of a youth staff, and we are endeavouring to obtain the services of someone who has made a study and a hobby of the film industry, and someone who has a genuine interest in films *as films* and not in cinematography as a method of conveying some other form."

One of the effects of this film circle has been quite unexpected. Some members have almost entirely given up going to the cinema in favour of participating in drama groups and other club activities.

There has to be constant process of beginning again with new groups from a simple level. This can only be done if there are enough people who take the cinema seriously and simply; few of the connoisseurs who know all about the latest Russian films are interested in the entertainment of ordinary people in the local cinema. The Student Christian Movement in Leeds has arranged an admirable week-end conference on films. The question arises whether it is not necessary for teachers to know as much about the making of films as they do about the Elizabethan stage and the composition of a symphony orchestra. To teach boys and girls in school how films are made would be one way of sending at least some of them to the cinema "on the watch" for some of the things which they had learned, which is a stage better than the attitude of mere receptivity.

The question of children's cinema clubs is receiving an airing in the press. Mr. Rank went into the cinema business because, as a Christian, he wanted to see what could be done to raise the standard of the commercial cinema. The cinema clubs are very much his own idea. They have met with much the same mixed reception accorded to other combinations of idealism and commerce. Children join a cinema club. On Saturday mornings they see a programme of films specially chosen for them. Unfortunately the range of films from which to choose is very limited. There have been caustic comments on the "club promise" made to the manager, and the somewhat blatant and tactless moralizings. That the cinema manager should take charge of the proceedings and become known to large numbers of boys and girls is very good. Ersatz clubs with promises, membership badges and the like were not invented by the cinema; they were commonplaces of the cheap press and of commercial advertising before the war. It is to be hoped that criticism of the club element which may soon be seen to be outmoded and not very useful will not blind people's eyes to the potential importance of this development. That there should be a demand for first-class children's films is excellent. If this experiment can outgrow its beginnings and children's cinema clubs become children's cinemas for which our best writers, actors, producers and technicians will make films as good as the classics in children's books, the step will be a very important one.

Yours sincerely,

*Kathleen Bliss*

## WARDOUR STREET

It will be just fifty years next month since the first flickering, fluttering moving-picture was publicly exhibited. The show took place in the Regent Street Polytechnic and took ten minutes, during which half a dozen different items appeared. By 1900 the Animated Picture or the Biograph had almost completely ousted the penny peep-show from the fair ground. Enterprising showmen had seized upon this new invention and any moving film was an attraction. By 1903, both here and in America, the public was getting tired of "Turning out the Fire-engine," "The Horse-race," the photograph of the slapstick music-hall turn and the Frenchman Meliés' trick photography of disappearing women. In that year the first fifteen-minute story films were turned out within a few months of one another. In America it was "The Great Train Robbery." In all its essentials it was the normal Western of to-day, even to having the dancing scene in the local saloon.

In England it was "Episodes in the Life of Charles Peace," ending on the scaffold in a most gruesome scene. This was the earliest "documentary." It tried to recreate actual happenings, and though less polished, was in its way the prototype of the more recent Ealing Studio production, "San Demetrio."

The little story films were shown in permanent halls—the nickel-odeons, as they were called in America. The stories began to get longer, and by 1909 films of an hour or an hour and a half's duration were common. Halls were now "picture theatres," but prices were still very small compared with the legitimate theatre. The stories used were highly romantic and melodramatic. The films were turned out by the hundred, cheaply enough for them to be sold outright to the owners of the picture theatres.

In another year or two the film had become firmly established in popular favour, and noted actors and actresses, even Sarah Bernhardt herself, did not disdain to act before the camera. Costs of production increased, and films were no longer sold outright. They were hired, the rights being retained by the production company.

All countries produced films. Italy specialized in the gigantic and florid like Dante's *Inferno*; England filmed novels like *East Lynn*; America perfected the Western, and Tom Mix became the schoolboy's hero all over the world. France, Germany, and the other European countries contributed their quota in characteristic national vein.

With the 1914 war, European production almost ceased and America obtained the dominating position, from which her film industry has never been ousted. Nevertheless, though British

production never really recovered after 1918, Germany, France and Sweden produced a number of films which were able to compete with the American product, at least in the European market.

After 1917 Russian production quickly got into its stride. The technical excellence of Russian films, the skilful use of the camera and of cutting, made a name for them among the *intelligentsia*. But they were politically suspect, and therefore never a serious competitor for screen time in the ordinary commercial cinema theatre, where exhibitors feared alienating their patrons.

During all this time, America was steadily gaining the upper hand by lavish expenditure on production and high pressure salesmanship on the distribution side. In 1929 came the sound film, but the American position was so strong internationally that markets were retained even by the new "all-singing, all-talking, all-dancing" films shown to people who did not know a word of English.

In order to try and stem the tide and maintain some native production, country after country introduced strict censorship or quota laws. In England our first quota act was in 1927, the result of which was to keep alive a British industry, and to turn out enough films to comply with the law. But as there were no stipulations as to artistic standards or costs, the act was responsible for the appalling series of productions known as the "quota quickies."

In 1937 a new quota act was passed, and an attempt was made to rectify the mistakes of the old by introducing inducements to spend more on production. How this new act was going to fail never really emerged, as with the beginning of the new war, the calling-up of technicians, the taking over of studio space and the drop in the number of British films that could be made, the Quota Act was more honoured in the breach than in the observance.

## THE STRUCTURE OF THE FILM INDUSTRY

Before any suggestions for change can be made, the present structure of the film industry has to be clearly understood. There are three essential functions to be performed :—

### *Production*

Films can only be made at very considerable cost. For £80,000 one can only get a very modest little film. "Henry V" is said to have cost every penny of £600,000, and the new "Caesar and Cleopatra," for which a Sphinx was taken to Egypt, has cost well over £1,000,000. Sums such as these cannot be recouped from a small market like the British, where £150,000 is considered to be an excellent return on a film.

Some films are made by new companies formed for the purpose, but most are made by long-established production companies such

as Two Cities, Gainsborough, Ealing, Columbia and so forth. Provided that some group can be found to put up the money, production is a comparatively simple matter. It is possible to hire studio space, technicians, and, despite the number held under contract by other companies, satisfactory actors and actresses. But it is one thing, after six or nine months' work and the expenditure of, say, half a million dollars, to have a dozen tins of celluloid by the side of your desk. It is another thing to get that celluloid projected on the commercial screen, and to recoup the outlay.

To help accomplish this task each company maintains an expensive publicity organization. These publicists have to keep up the steady flow of news about the stars and their doings, domestic or otherwise ; to make people conscious of a new production before it has even been scripted ; to build up glamour round a new personality, and generally to minister to the news hunger of the vast audience whose innate hero-worship finds its expression in picking up crumbs of news in the newspapers of the special "fan press."

### *Distribution*

Distribution is a complicated matter, involving not only the home market, but the international market. Certain companies have specialized on the "renting" side. They buy the rights in a film for a specified number of years from the production company. They then rent copies of the film to the actual cinema where it is shown. The rent is not a fixed sum, but is a percentage of the gross takings of the cinema. It may be as low as 35 per cent or 40 per cent or as high as 50 per cent. Seventy per cent has even been asked—and accepted!

The renters are the powers in the film industry. Without their services the producing companies could never recoup their immense outlays. At the same time, they hold the cinema managers in the hollow of their hand—"If you want this money-spinning film, you've got to take these other made-to-measure productions"—is their line of argument. American companies have their British subsidiary companies for placing American films in the British market. What Smithfield is to butchers, and Covent Garden to greengrocers, Wardour Street is to film renters. The renters too maintain a publicity organization to assist their high pressure salesmanship. To them are due the trailers, the foyer stills, the special foyer displays, and—when the paper was available—the lurid posters. They think up the superlatives which describe every mediocre production.

### *Exhibition*

Most of the large super-cinemas in this country are owned by cinema circuits—the Odeon, Gaumont British, and Associated British Picture Corporation (A.B.C.) are the best known. Between them they

own 1,100 out of the 1,800 "first run" houses. There are numbers of small cinemas owned by private individuals. Most of them are adapted buildings not originally designed as cinemas. The films shown—especially in the little houses in poor districts—are booked at a flat rate, and are old and worn out. The normal programme consists of "second features" of a cheaply sentimental or crudely humorous character. Such halls are reasonably profitable. The takings are around £80 a week, the programme costs between £5 and £10, wages and upkeep in the neighbourhood of £50, and the whole is conducted on a cash basis.

Vertical cartelization is an obvious development of this system. By knowing that a certain number of cinemas are bound to show the film he has in mind, the producer can budget with more accuracy. It is also convenient for him not to have to hawk his wares round to a number of renting organizations, driving as good a bargain as he can. Therefore it is common to find, as in the case of Warners, a production company with the necessary studios, inter-locking with a renting company, and having an arrangement with a chain of cinemas.

The outstanding event of the war period in the British film industry has been the emergence of Mr. J. Arthur Rank as the Colossus bestriding our industry. It is less than ten years since his interest in the possibilities of the film was aroused by considering it in relation to religion.

Mr. Rank owns the major studios in this country, and is thus directly interested in Two Cities, Gainsborough, or any new company formed to make a special picture which makes use of those studios. All their products are handled by General Film Distributors, of which Mr. Rank is Chairman. Mr. Rank is also Chairman of the Odeon and Gaumont British circuits, which own most of the major super-cinemas in the country.

The tendency to cartelization caused the Government two years ago to investigate the tendencies to monopoly in the British Film Industry, and to issue a White Paper on the subject. The findings are well worthy of study.

Mr. Rank's object in massing so much power in his hands is, he says, to have a big enough *bloc* to be able to talk to America on equal terms. Hitherto there has been only the tiniest trickle of British films on to the world's screens. We have had no world-wide distributing organization. The Motion Picture Year Book shows that the major American renters have establishments in every great centre throughout the world. These powerful renters are very few in number. Their names are household words : M.G.M., Columbia, Warner Brothers, Paramount, R.K.O., Twentieth Century Fox, United Artists are the most important.

Screen time is valuable. In order to recoup the sum they have had to pay the production company, film renters jealously guard their privileged position, and vigorously oppose any attempt to break in on their virtual monopoly. This is the reason why, in the English-speaking world, British films are so rarely seen, save in this country. Why, indeed, should an American renter, especially if he has a working arrangement with an American production company, buy the rights of a foreign-made film and distribute it? As a good American he is convinced that his product is best, and he knows that because people are used to the American idiom, his films take more money than those of other countries.

### *The Film Critics*

The scene is not complete, however, if we omit the film critics, who stand outside the industry, and exercise an independent and important function. The standard of film criticism is very high, but it is limited for the most part to the national daily and Sunday papers, and the weeklies which are read by a minority. The paragraphs which appear in many provincial and local papers calling attention to films showing at local cinemas, are not independent criticism, but are "puffs" supplied by the renters. Simple independent criticism in local newspapers and even Parish Magazines, of films actually showing, is an urgent need.

### **SOME EFFECTS OF THE PRESENT STRUCTURE**

Our general picture is, therefore, of a small British film industry, which has during the war produced some extraordinarily good films, entirely lacking the means to export its products, and overtapped even in the home market by the huge and highly organized American industry.

Far more space than is available would be needed to enumerate and examine with any care the effects of the structure of the film industry, and of the American monopoly of the commercial screen. They are indeed almost incalculable.

The film is a political instrument. Readers will remember the stir that the Warner Bros. film "Objective Burma" caused in this country a short while ago. The film by implication inferred that the liberation of Burma was achieved solely by American arms. Owing to the storm of protest it was withdrawn here, but it had already been shown in all other countries of the world. The makers of the film expressed astonishment at the outcry, and attributed it to British hypersensitiveness. They wanted to make a story-film about Burma: everybody knows that the screen is only make-believe, and that the British did most of the fighting in Burma. So why, they ask, all this fuss?

But is it a fact that the average cinema-goer can always distinguish between truth and fiction on the screen? The screen is

a vivid medium. Critical judgment in an audience is largely submerged in an emotional surge. If an audience has no standards of comparison it will tend to accept as fact what is presented so vividly by the film. The average cinema-goer in other countries probably thought that, like so many other films dealing with the war, e.g. "Bataan," "Guadalcanal Diary," "Corregidor," "Objective Burma" was a reconstruction of an actual incident.

Just because the film is not *direct* political propaganda, but is entertainment, its political influence is the more powerful. From time to time before the war, the Chinese Government protested at the fact that in films the Chinaman was always the subtle, inscrutable, insinuating villain. The Mexican Government equally complained that the Mexican was normally shown as a worthless creature. Not only was it annoying their own people, but they claimed that it was reducing their country's prestige in the eyes of the rest of the world.

The film is also an admirable shop-window for a country's goods. The U.S.A. makes no bones about the beneficial effect on her trade of the universal circulation of American films. Other countries too want to use this shop-window, and therefore increase their exports. This forms another source of political friction between countries wanting screen time.

Most important of all are the implications of the film as a cultural medium. Most of us have noticed in this country the effect of American films on such superficial things as slang, hair-styles, clothes, and general behaviour, and the depth of the influence of films has been frequently discussed.

What has been said in this Supplement about the structure of the film industry is enough to indicate that what is the main entertainment of the great mass of British people—there are 1,560 million film attendances in this country a year—is not an expression of a local or even of a national culture. The film expresses no local variations in culture, and indeed is helping to obliterate them. The commercial cinema is very little frequented by the more thoughtful, for whom film societies provide rare performances of films of a higher standard, including a considerable number of foreign films.

How can the choice of themes and their treatment in the commercially produced films be improved? Can it be done within the present commercial set-up? These are vital questions, and must be pursued further.

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